



Refugee Council
of Australia



2014 CONSULTATION WITH REFUGEE YOUNG PEOPLE

In November 2014, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) and the Multicultural Youth Affairs Network (MYAN) NSW organised a consultation with refugee young people to gather their views on Australia's refugee and asylum seeker policies. The consultation, which was generously hosted by the Mt Druitt Ethnic Communities Agency (MECA), formed part of RCOA's annual national consultations on Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program.

Seven young people took part in the consultation. Participants came from several different countries of origin (including Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan) and had arrived in Australia through a variety of channels (being resettled from overseas, seeking asylum after having arrived by plane and seeking asylum after having arrived by boat).

This summary provides an overview of the key issues and concerns raised by participants in the consultation. The feedback gathered through this consultation was used to inform RCOA's submission on the 2015-16 Refugee and Humanitarian Program. The full submission can be downloaded at <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/publications/intake-submission>

CONDITIONS IN COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN AND ASYLUM

Some participants highlighted the conditions in their country of origin which had forced them to flee. One participant spoke of religious minority groups being targeted by extremists, while another noted that *"I didn't have a chance to go to school or university due to conflicts between religious and ethnic groups"*.

Participants also drew attention to the difficult living conditions faced by refugees in many countries of asylum, in particular lack of legal status (which in turn places refugees at risk of arrest and detention) and lack of access to livelihood opportunities. In the words of one participant: *"Imagine you are a mother with three kids, you escape your country and you went to UNHCR and they never gave you any money to survive, what do you do? You are not in your own country. You can't speak the language, you can't work, where do you get money from? How do you survive? The main thing is, how can you survive with your kids?"*

These difficult living conditions were seen as being a particularly significant problem given that many refugees lack access to timely durable solutions. For example, a number of participants highlighted the long waiting times for resettlement through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As explained by one participant, *"It takes a lot of time for the UNHCR process. In countries like Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, Pakistan and India, where they have UNHCR centres, it is a difficult situation. If you are outside the UNHCR compound, you are illegal in that country. You can't even go outside."* Another similarly noted that *"The UN process takes roughly 17 years for you to be resettled in a country like Australia...But if you are living in a country like India or Indonesia or Pakistan, you are not allowed to work. How can you survive? How can you survive in a country where you don't have any legal documents?"*

FAMILY SEPARATION

One participant who had arrived in Australia alone spoke movingly of being separated from their family members: *“My family back in [country], they’re in danger. I feel that they are dying every day and I can’t do anything. I am safe here physically but my mind is never safe. I can feel my family dying overseas every day. If anything happens in [country], I feel like I have lost my family... You see things happening overseas and you can’t do anything.”*

With opportunities for reunification being limited, this participant faced the prospect of prolonged separation from their family members: *“You have to be on your Protection Visa for more than three years and then you have to apply to be a citizen. Then, after you have become a citizen, you can sponsor your family, which takes ages.”*

CONTRASTING EXPERIENCES OF SEEKING ASYLUM

Consultation participants who had sought asylum in Australia after having arrived by plane with valid visas reported positive experiences with Australia’s asylum process. They felt that the process was efficient and that they had been treated respectfully by Australian officials. In the words of one participant, *“[Australia] has done a lot. More than I ever expected, more than any of us have ever expected. We are used to situations where, if we go to the Government in our own country, it takes ages, we have to bribe them sometimes. But over here, I was given my own rights, I was given my own voice, it was a whole different situation for us. I was very impressed and would like to thank the Australian Government and the United Nations for what they have done for us.”*

These experiences contrasted starkly with those of a consultation participant who had arrived by boat without a visa. Due to their mode of arrival, processing of their asylum claim had been delayed and they had limited access to services, support and opportunities: *“When I arrived I was 17. Imagine if you are 17 and you are not allowed to go to school, there are no funds for you to go to school. Now I’m almost 20. The best years of my life are gone. When can I go to school? When can I go to college? When can I have my education? I don’t know what will happen to me or when I will have funds at least to go to school. It could take another four to five years. How old will I be then? In the circumstances in which I’m living, do you think I will be safe? You can’t be sustained, you just stay home all day and do nothing, just keep worrying... You are spending your life like it’s a prison, stay home all day, do nothing.”*

CONTRIBUTING TO AUSTRALIA

Regardless of their mode of arrival, consultation participants had made notable efforts to achieve and contribute to the Australian community. They shared stories of obtaining a scholarship, receiving an award for academic achievement, working with local police to prevent radicalisation amongst young people, participating in Clean Up Australia Day, providing assistance in the wake of the 2010-11 Brisbane floods and organising blood donation drives. One participant commented *“We love to give back rather than take”*.

Some participants highlighted the importance of raising awareness about issues affecting refugees and asylum seekers, to address misinformation and lack of understanding. As noted by one participant, *“I try to educate people. I think people don’t know much about asylum seekers and what they are going through. I think it’s a lack of education and understanding.”* Another participant spoke of working with local media to highlight positive stories about their community.